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ABSTRACT

Designed for media specialists and educators, the four articles in this issue focus on television's effects on children. Following a brief editorial reviewing current directions of research in this area, the first article compares the American pre-school educational television program "Sesame Street" with its Australian counterpart. Learning objectives, the pre- and postproduction research, and the impact both programs have on young viewers are considered. The second article discusses the design of a new Australian pre-school television program. The growing market for children's films and videotapes in cable television is outlined in the third article. The final article in this issue reviews eight films ranging from pure cinema to documentary and narrative shorts. (LP)

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young viewers

Winter 1981

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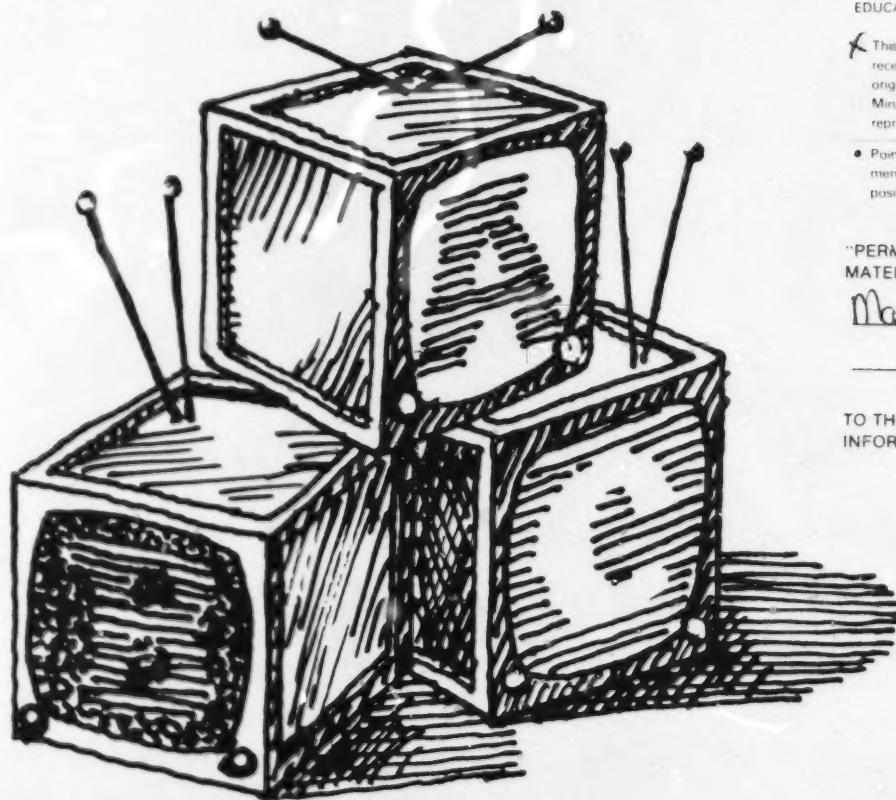
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**what kids learn
from the screen**

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Maureen Gaffney, Editor; Gina Michaels, Managing Editor; Merrill Lee Fuchs, Molly Hankwitz, Jane Rayleigh, Assistant Editors; Deirdre Boyle, Editorial Consultant.

editorial

Current media research is proving more and more interesting. At long last, things seem to be moving beyond the early focus on television violence and children -- not that it's an unimportant area for research, it's simply not the only area that needs research. The lead article in this issue compares the American pre-school educational television program, "Sesame Street", with its Australian counterpart, "Play School." Author/researcher Noble examines the teaching/learning objectives, the pre- and post-production research, and the impact both programs have on young viewers. While his conclusions are based on preliminary studies, Noble's article should give media professionals and parents alike some provocative food for thought -- in particular because "Sesame Street" is broadcast in forty countries and will soon be aired in China.

Also in this issue, the second part of Kendall's "The Many Faces of TV" discusses the design of his pre-school program, a design which sounds (since we have not seen the program) similar in some respects to "Mister Roger's Neighborhood." When Kendall's and Noble's articles are added to recent research findings (namely, Jerome and Dorothy Singer: "Fostering Creativity in Children: Can TV Stimulate Imaginative Play?", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 26:3, Summer 1976; Singer, Singer, Tower and Biggs: "Differential Effects of Television Programming on Preschoolers' Cognition and Play," a paper presented at the 1977 convention of the American Psychological Association; and Gavriel Salomon: *Interaction of Media, Cognition, and Learning*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1979) perhaps they will generate some new solutions to program design for very young children.

Children's programming on cable (unfortunately called "kidvid" in the industry jargon) is an enlarging market for children's films and videotapes. ICAP staffer Mandelberger gives readers a quick sketch of who is doing what in the area. This issue also includes the third Film Review Supplement. The eight films reviewed therein range from pure cinema (often called "film-as-art") to documentary and narrative shorts.



the uses of research

some thoughts on children and television

by grant noble

My own interest in television was awakened when I observed hitherto incommunicative autistic children reproduce television advertising slogans on a typewriter. Those slogans were their first communication with the outside world. Now, for me, the wheel has come full circle. The idea for the research I am presently conducting on "Play School" came after I read the program's mail and found letters from autistic children who apparently had made their first response to a person by interacting with "Play School" actors/presenters.

People too often presume that television uses children, that children respond mechanically to images on the screen; nowhere is this thinking more evident than in studies of the effects of television violence on children. Most researchers simply assume that violence on the small screen injects violence into children so that after viewing they behave more aggressively.

Such a mechanical model raises serious questions in my mind. I prefer to align myself with the uses and gratification theorists who ask not "What does television do to children?" but "What do children do with television?" A different model is assumed here; one that sees the child as an active viewer, selecting programs that s/he wants to see, able to describe the viewing experience to a researcher. This involves a shift from the behavioral to the phenomenological, whereby the experiences of the child viewer are regarded as the only true data for analysis.

Naturally there are problems with the phenomenological perspective; assumptions, particularly those made implicitly, color any so-called objective scientific data. This contradiction was well expressed in 1898 when Leo Tolstoy wrote of the then modern science:

It is as if a man, wishing to understand the use of an object lying before him--instead of coming close to it, examining it from all sides and handling it--were to retire farther from it until he was at such a distance that all its peculiarities of color and...surface had disappeared and only its outline was...visible... [and] from there he were to begin writing a minute description of the object imagining... he clearly understood it, and that this understanding, formed at such a distance, would assist a complete comprehension of it.

Experience versus Behavior

Outside uses and gratification research, few studies of the effects of television on children have asked young viewers what they think. Instead, children are manipulated in laboratory studies, and their behavior, rather than their experience, analyzed.

In the area of televised aggression some boys actively seek out programs containing violence. Why? To quote a ten-year-old boy, "It makes me feel good to see them punching others in the face." An eight-year-old boy said, "I like the punching because when they [the good guys] fight they always win...the fighting in the news is different from "Batman" because policemen sometimes get killed. Batman always wins and the fighting on the news is real. They really hurt each other; on "Batman" they don't...Fighting on television shows is all right because they don't really fight, they only miss them." As Desmond Morris said on a talk-show, "Televised fighting is like a ballet. Real fights are ten times as fast and close in, rather than at a distance." Children know this too. They also know why they watch. As one seven-year-old boy said of "Blake's 7" (a BBC space travel adventure series), "When I am in a temper, it cools me down."

Whom do you believe? Do you accept that children have views, rights, and valid opinions, or do you accept the scientific research of Liebert et al.,² for example, who find that children are more likely to push a hurt button than a help button after watching televised aggression? I have no doubts that children know what they are talking about. It is my concern with the child's experience, rather than his/her behavior, which explains why I have chosen to study the Australian preschool program "Play School."

Understanding the Medium

As I tried to point out elsewhere,³ "Sesame Street," because of skillful marketing and typical American razzmatazz, is generally thought of as the educational preschool television program. Although I am pleased that some Americans saw fit to take up the challenge of using television as an educator, we should not think the battle has been won. Television remains a relatively untried medium. When one considers that it took a hundred years for the novel to evolve, the twenty or so years that we've had television are

hardly enough, despite the rapid technological advances, to exploit the hidden potentialities of this new and extremely powerful medium.

I won't attempt to list the things we don't know about television, but I find it particularly distressing that worldwide we still don't know very much about the way children either watch or understand television in their formative years. Speaking as a relative pioneer in this area, I can only applaud the fact that American researchers have in the past few years recognized this as a worthy topic for investigation. Yet I must rebuke them for concentrating so heavily on the effects of televised aggression before learning the answer to a more fundamental question: What is it that children see when they watch?

Research Basis of "Sesame Street"

Since "Sesame Street" does not focus on violence, the research employed in its creation makes an interesting study. Hailed in 1973 by its creators David Connell and Edward Palmer⁴ as "bringing something entirely new to American television" and "helping to alleviate the great void in early education," the actual research employed is, on analysis, quite scant. As Connell described it, "A major concern of the pre-broadcast season was the development of a popular program...[It] would have to win an audience... over programs aired on much more familiar commercial television channels."

To find answers to the numerous questions raised about what appeals to preschoolers, Palmer says,

We needed a method of obtaining highly specific attentional data. The distractor method was developed to provide this type of information. After considering a variety of response measures, we selected eyes on the television set as our dependent variable...[because] a child watching television under normal conditions is subject to frequent interruptions and distractions. The television must vie for his [or her] attention. In order to simulate this condition, we decided to program distractions into the laboratory situation...

...The observer was equipped with a push button notation to record when the child's eyes left the television and when they returned to the television. From this data it was possible to determine what portion of each interval the child's eyes were on the television set. Cumulative graphs were constructed showing the attention fluctuations of a group of children for each interval of the piece being tested.

Some of Connell and Palmer's findings seem obvious. They found "attention generally higher for animated film," and noted that children enjoy catchy commercial jingles, stating they often "know many of them by heart." Not surprisingly, they found slapstick comedy to be "a favorite with preschoolers." Other findings were rather less predictable. They noted that children "particularly enjoy seeing other children on television." They also found rapidly paced segments "generally more appealing than slower paced segments"; however, a slow film is more appealing to young viewers "when surrounded by fast moving films than when it follows another quiet piece."

Other findings are highly questionable. For instance, "Segments which show adults talking generally score low. This was a very consistent finding. Excess adult verbiage resulted in a loss of attention in a variety of types of programming." However, Connell concedes, "Adult talk can be more effective if, rather than showing the speaker on the screen, the referent was shown." Perhaps we should question the validity of results obtained by the distractor technique, since there has been no methodological development, and no proof that such results are valid.⁵



Goals for "Sesame Street"

Children's Television Workshop, the production company for "Sesame Street," commissioned the Educational Testing Service to find out what children were learning from the program. Evaluation was possible because the goals for "Sesame Street" were specified in the best behavioral tradition. Seminars were held to establish curriculum goals, teaching strategies, and behavioral objectives. Eventually four broad goal areas were distinguished, namely:

- symbolic representation (recognition of letters, numbers, and geometric shapes and forms);
- cognitive organization (perceptual discrimination, relational concepts, and classification);
- reasoning and problem solving (the "three of these things belong together" tasks); and
- the child in his/her social and physical world (exploring the child's neighborhood and the people and situations which would be routinely encountered).

Unfortunately, the advice of the educational experts with whom "Sesame Street" producers consulted in pre-production planning was disregarded, particularly in the reasoning and social world objectives.

We must bear in mind that the prime audience for "Sesame Street" is the preschooler, most typically the four-year-old. Much of the child development literature suggests that tasks such as those above may be beyond the capabilities of the four-year-old. Four-year-olds are predominantly ego-centric in thought and because of egocentrism, the child is, according to Piaget, the unwitting prisoner of his/her own individual perspective. S/he assumes that everybody thinks as s/he does, and is therefore unable to attain the "Sesame Street" goal "to recognize that a single event may be seen and interpreted differently by different individuals."⁷

In Piagetian terms the preschooler is described as pre-operational in thought. This means the child cannot use operations like reversibility or serialization. Reversibility means the child cannot mentally reverse a sequence of events and is therefore unable to admit conversion (as in the famous jug and water experiments⁸). S/he is dominated by the here and now, which may explain why children find it hard to distinguish ads from television programs, and why they have trouble recounting the storyline of a program.

Serialization is another operation in thought which is beyond the capability of a four-year-old. When presented with an array of objects (e.g., sticks of different sizes), and asked to place them in size order, the four-year-old must compare each pair to see which is larger, which smaller; s/he cannot order them in a simple array from biggest to smallest because these concepts are not yet within the child's mental vocabulary.

Oblivious of such knowledge, "Sesame Street" included among its objectives that "...given the largest and smallest of five objects which are graduated in size, the child can insert the three intermediate objects

in their proper order, and...[for] size relationships ...[s/he] can learn to correctly use big, bigger, biggest, short, tall, skinny, and little."⁹

Less than the Sum of Its Parts

In the 1930s, a Russian psychologist Lev Semenovich Vygotsky demonstrated that four-year-olds think in "chain-complexes." Children at this age, he says, learn by association and link two items together because of one element in common.¹⁰ Thus a child might put horse and duck together because they are both animals. S/he might, after that, put water with duck because ducks swim in water. The child then links horse, duck, and water together. The ideas are related not by a superordinate concept, but a chain of associations. Since it is a collage program with no overall sequential organization of items, "Sesame Street" seems to disregard chain-complex learning¹¹ by children.

A Confusing Situation

Bogatz and Ball¹² evaluated the effectiveness of "Sesame Street" in its first two seasons by comparing before and after cognitive skills of a large sample of preschool children, either in a no-treatment control group or in an "encouragement" group which was visited frequently and given toys and books dealing with the show. They found that viewers, after six months, had made significantly greater gains than non-viewers on tests of letter recognition, number recognition, and sorting skills. Children who watched more learned more.

However, when Cook et al.¹³ re-analyzed Bogatz and Ball's data they reached different conclusions, saying that the original analysis did not separate viewing from encouragement. Re-analysis showed that the learning gains were neither as large nor as generalized as the initial report suggested. A good part of the learning gains resulted from encouragement rather than increased viewing.

One wonders why "Sesame Street" has not been entirely successful. When my colleagues and I interviewed children who had seen "Sesame Street" here at the University of New England (New South Wales), we gained some clues. In the episode watched, an attempt was made to teach the difference between some and all by having a person order some or all the items on a menu. When we questioned four-year-olds about their understanding of these concepts, one child, asked what some meant, replied one because in the end, only one item (milk) was available. A similar error in learning occurred for the letter Q. Children watched an ant laboriously carry a Q to the top of a hill. When asked what words begin with Q, one four-year-old replied, "Hill."

A Quick Comparison

My own preliminary studies find that although "Sesame Street" attracts children's attention initially, they pay more attention to "Play School" for longer periods. With "Sesame Street," attention is erratic; children tend to look up at the beginning of a segment then lose interest until the beginning of the next segment. Moreover, since "Sesame Street" objectives are so specific, children must comply with the learning offered. It could be argued that "Sesame Street" does not teach children how to think; it teaches them what to think. Its frequently repeated segments which are intended to teach the basic skills of early education may only assist the child to rote learn counting and the alphabet, without an understanding of the concepts of literacy and numeracy--the underlying cognitive abilities.

As far as "Sesame Street" is concerned, I have serious questions about the research design, as well as the appropriateness of its objectives, and have demonstrated that in some instances it is not an effective teacher. However, the limited research I have conducted to date with "Play School" suggests that it is achieving its goals (to encourage creativity, ego integration, formation of human relationships, language development, thinking

skills, perceptions of reality as distinct from fantasy, and extension of experience)--goals which show acute regard for the four-year-old viewer as a person rather than as a receiver of didactic educational propaganda. "Play School" uses adult presenters who talk directly to the child at home; children watching the program answer questions, offer suggestions, and join in with the presenters in an interactive mode of viewing. This is a good example of the process of para-social interaction¹⁴ and an important aspect of how television can be used by viewers.

The success of any children's program depends on the understanding which producers and researchers have of this new medium, as well as on the child's ability to comprehend what is being presented. In my judgment, "Sesame Street" has moved a pawn forward two squares, but "Play School" has opened with the queen.



FOOTNOTES

1 "Modern Science," *Recollections and Essays*, Aylmer Maude, translator (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

2 Robert M. Liebert, John M. Neale, Emily S. Davidson, *The Early Window: Effects of Television on Children and Youth* (New York: Pergamon, 1973).

3 Grant Noble and Julie Marie Duck, "Sesame Street and Play School: A Comparison and Contrast of the Two Programs as Suitable for a Four-Year-Old Target Audience," *Media Information Australia*, 13 (1979).

4 "Sesame Street--A Case Study," in *Broadcaster/Researcher Co-operation in Mass Communication Research*, J. D. Halloran and M. Gurevitch, eds. (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1971).

5 When Allan Kendall, executive producer of "Play School," visited Lewis Bernstein, assistant head of research for "Sesame Street," Bernstein was having second thoughts about the effectiveness of adult talk. He indicated that it might be more involving for children than previously thought. It seems to depend on treatment, i.e., how the adults are talking.

6 Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street* (New York: Random House, 1974).

7 Ibid.

8 Typically, the child watches two identical jugs being filled with identical amounts of water and will admit that each jug contains the same amount of water. When the water is poured from these jugs into two dissimilarly shaped jugs, the child denies that they contain equal amounts of water because s/he cannot mentally rerun the film, as it were, backwards in his/her head.

9 Lesser, op.cit.

10 *Thought and Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962).

11 "Play School" apparently exploits such learning to its advantage; each item is linked to the previous one to create a flow in continuity, and presenters continually return to the meaning of concepts during a program.

12 Gerry Ann Bogatz and Samuel Ball, *The Second Year of Sesame Street: A Continuing Evaluation* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1972).

13 Thomas D. Cook, Hilary Appleton, Ross F. Connor, Ann Shaffer, Gary Tomkin, and Stephen J. Weber, *Sesame Street Revisited* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1975).

14 Grant Noble, *Children in Front of the Small Screen* (London: Constable, 1975).

the many faces of tv

an interactive preschool program from australia (part two)

by allan kendall

Children's programs in different cultures reflect quite different assumptions about the medium, about children, and about the relationship between them, and they may well have different impacts on their audience. However, the research coverage of these various possibilities is remarkably lop-sided. Hitherto, most research has been confined to exploring the assumption that television content molds children. In this *tabula rasa* approach (which dominates American research) it is assumed that the learning is essentially observational and, by implication, passive. The child imitates. In Piagetian terms, such learning is not formative of new organizations in the child. It is less crucial than the learning which results from the child's direct and spontaneous interaction with the objects and the people in his or her environment.

The central thesis of this article, born of extensive observation of children's responses to programs (but as yet only partially researched) is that television as perceived by the young child is not necessarily a passive experience. Nor is the medium per se passive. Programs can be produced in such a way as to evoke a surprising degree of interaction. In such television, the direct and sympathetic communication of presenter to child, acknowledging the child's existence and calling on his/her personal and individual reactions, is vital. In large measure, the child responds to the extent that s/he perceives the relationship to be immediate and actual. To accentuate this perception, a high degree of spontaneity is necessary, both in scripting and in presentation. The tone needs to be one of sharing rather than of imposition. And both content and the television techniques employed need to be aimed at the appropriate developmental level. Otherwise, lack of comprehension is likely to inhibit interaction.

The potentially positive impact of this mode of television on such developmental areas as ego integration, involvement in human relationships, perceptions of reality, language development, thinking skills, creativity and extension of experience is discussed in relation to the Australian Broadcasting Commission (A.B.C.) program, "Play School."

A Special Pact

The interactive relationship between television presenter and child is described by researcher Aimee Dorr as something of potential value. Her underlying assumption is that it works because the child believes the relationship to be actual and immediate.

More than one character in a program for young children has reported the indignation of children who, in real life encounters, find the person behaving as though they were strangers. Children will marshal all the evidence of the character talking to and looking at them each day, and of them talking to the characters, to support their beliefs that the children and the characters know each other well. My son displayed such beliefs when he was three and saw me being interviewed on television. His father reported that he called out my name, asked me questions and tried to show me things. He became quite angry when I continued to ignore his attempts to engage me in social interchange and finally left the room in disgust. When the medium of television is understood in this way, some of the programs the child watches may serve as simply another social interaction in which the child participates. If this is true, then the young child may understand and learn from television programs in ways that are quite similar to those in other daily social encounters. We could expect information, requests, emotional displays and orders to be responded to as they are when a live adult delivers them to a child.¹

For Dorr's son, his mother was there and he wanted to talk to her right then. And, had she, perchance, looked him square in the eye, it is a good bet that his conviction would have been absolute. Had she spoken to him intimately and suggested that they sing a favorite nursery rhyme together, an extraordinary pact would have been joined.

Response to Direct Communication

The joining of that pact between television presenter and child is the basis of "Play School." Everything we do in the program radiates from the directness and warmth of that close, personal relationship and extends to a range of experiences that even Marie Winn could not describe as passive. She would have a hard time defending her belief in a room of children watching "Play School," and she would risk being trampled to death by a herd of stampeding "elephants" or battered by a score of whirling "windmills." We expect such physically active responses to "Play School." We aim for them and get them; but we also get constant manifestations of that more subtle and mysterious thing, interaction.

In our experience, the typical preschool child, given the opportunity and the encouragement, will talk back to actor/presenters on television, answer questions, offer opinions, agree that sticky-tape can be difficult, and shout out warnings when danger threatens.

Even in group situations, a child will usually respond in this individual way. On television, the presenter's eyes are, after all, still looking at the child personally. As I have observed it, children watching "Play School" in a group will turn to each other to make comments only when the friendly television face disappears, as it does during an illustrated story or in the program's film insert (the danger points in interactive television); but when the face is there they relate directly to it. They show every sign of believing.

Of course the actor is not looking deep into the eyes of the child and responding to the child's reactions. S/he is sitting in a studio staring down the barrel of a camera. How can one speak of interaction? Well, begging the question of whether the truth is subconsciously true even for adults, it is certainly not the truth for a child at a certain stage of development. The face is there because the immediate, concrete perception of it is so dominant. And from the range of sensitive responses on the actor's face, either to what s/he is doing, or what is the likely response of the child, the four-year-old is getting some feedback. Effectively, there is some interaction. Autistic children have been known to make their first responses to "Play School" presenters (see Grant Noble's article in this issue, ed.)

The Actor/Presenters

The "Play School" presenters' constant spontaneous interplay with the child looks so easy. In fact, it is one of the most difficult things to do in television. Almost any actor believes s/he can do it; hardly any can. The best of them audition for us and what emerges is their inability to do anything but play roles. Divorced from role play, they have no idea who they are or who the child is. There can be no relationship. So they smile a lot and hope. No actor can do this work unless s/he knows exactly who s/he is and have enough courage to reveal his/her soul, because that is what the child sees. An actor may fool adults; s/he has no hope with young children. They haven't learned to accept artifice. The deepest secret of this work is best summed up by the word *spontaneity*. A child can't interact with a prepared and closed performance. S/he must have a deep conviction of the actual presence of the presenter. Nothing can be pat or formal or prepared. Every instant has to be discovered and shared. Yet every line is, in fact, scripted. As you might imagine, such acting is extremely difficult technically.

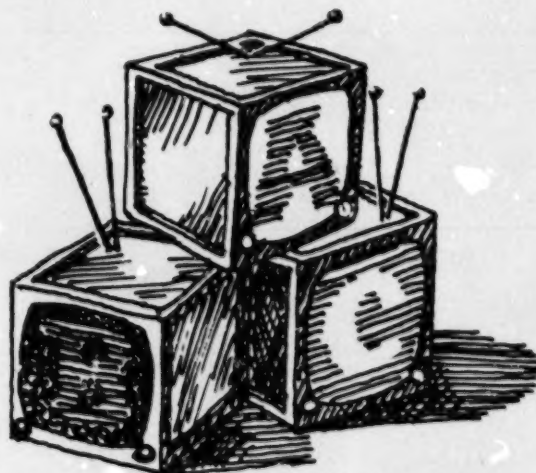
The Scripting

The writing of the script is just as difficult because ultimately it must seem as though there is no script—just spontaneous invention on the part of the presenters. In fact, the script is written to meet very stringent requirements. Content has to be discovered or created which relates to the week's given theme (e.g., home) with a characteristic tack for each day (e.g., relating to animals on pets' day). The various tacks are conceived to provide as fully rounded an experience of the theme as possible. The content must be cast at the right level and then shaped to the format so that everything flows naturally and seamlessly, yet, at the same time provides constant opportunities for participation and sharing. It takes three conferences to assemble an outline and two drafts before there is a script for rehearsal. After the first rehearsal it is often amended before studio day.

The Production

Given a script that can live and presenters who can make it live, we go into the studio to produce it as a live happening. Effectively, "Play School" is a half-hour live telecast. The only intrusion is a short three-minute film clip.

What we seek to create is an extension of the child's own recognizable world—one filled with familiar things like our Play School clock, the windows, the toys, and, of course, the regular people. The presenters talk to the child and do things with him/her that the child can do or make later from things around the house. It is a known, secure world in which believable things happen, things that are real in space and time. Gingerbread cookies take twenty minutes to bake. Castles do not get built in five seconds while we're looking at the calendar. The presenters do not pop up miraculously repositioned in other parts of the studio. (Either they are seen to move through space, or a credible time is left for the move to have taken place.) Nor do they magically "pop through the windows" so that they're in the regular set one instant and in a butcher's shop the next.



In general, we avoid anything arbitrary. Things emerge naturally from what went before and lead naturally to what comes next. Thus the whole fabric of "Play School" becomes an unforced exercise in pre-logic. Things have beginnings and consequences. They don't happen magically. If a puppet is to be given imaginary life, we must see it come into being. Then we show that it's the voice of the presenter that speaks for the puppet. Then, and only then, do we take a close-up of the puppet speaking and enjoy its imaginary life until we choose to drop it and see it become a lifeless puppet again. The child sees the assumption of a role and the dropping of it.

When we play roles in "Play School," we show ourselves all around the edges. We're still us. John Hamblin does that marvellously well. He will sort of assume a role so that the child knows it's still John pretending. And he'll keep dropping the role momentarily to confirm that he's still there. For the child, it is constant practice at mastering the transition: "I'm moving into a role and out of it!"

The quest for meaning also applies, predictably enough, to our use of camera techniques. Each camera cut is planned so as not to confuse. Our approach is to deal with the flow of attention. If I want to cut to a

close-up of a glass, I ask the presenter to handle it, to ask a question ("You've seen one of these before, haven't you?"), and then to look at it. At that instant I cut, on the flow of attention. Without the handling, the question, the look, and the right timing, the cut may lack sense.

Observation of Children

There is a great deal of work still to be done in the area of media literacy if we are to mold the medium to the needs of children. Television is quite a complex medium with its own grammar; to date we have done very little to unravel the mysteries of what television techniques are relevant to the different stages of a child's cognitive development. We've barely begun to realize that much television is simply not comprehensible to children. In the meantime, we are left to coin our own policies relating to our intentions, based on our own observations of children's responses. In a program designed to help a child actively wrap him/herself around experiences so that s/he will understand them, we find we have to deny ourselves many sophisticated techniques because they confuse, rather than illuminate. Even the snappy pace of "Sesame Street" is denied us. We have to work at a deeper level, and present information at the preschool child's pace of absorption.

The philosophy of "Play School" and our production methods are largely based on our observations of children's responses. Unlike other production units I know, we screen every program with children. Thus every production decision can be directly related to reactions of the target audience. The other uncommon feature of our method is the incorporation of expert advice at each stage of the production. Our adviser, who is a specialist in early childhood education, is with us from the first discussion of the idea, through the outline discussions, the draft scripting, the first rehearsal, and the final rehearsal in the studio. The techniques, as well as the concepts, are thus scrutinized from the point of view of the child's developmental level.

Research: Attention and Creativity

From the mountain of tabula rasa research, we know something of the impact of content on young children. But what of the impact of interactive television? In Australia there are but three relevant studies, two of those are by students. Beyond those, such faith as we may have in its possibilities is dependent upon field observation, the reports of parents and teachers, and mail from the children. The three studies shed some light, however, on my proposition that we need to know if differing approaches have different impact. As it happens, all three studies involve a comparison of "Play School" and "Sesame Street."

The two student studies, one under the supervision of Gerald Ashby² in Brisbane and one under Grant Noble³ at the University of New England, are both attentional studies. The first suggests that, although "Sesame Street" attracts attention more successfully in the first instance, children, over time, become more involved in "Play School"; attention to "Sesame Street" becomes erratic. The second study suggests that children stay involved for longer stretches of time with "Play School," but if a program loses a child, there is no obvious attention-attracting device to win him/her back. One can only speculate on the implications, but an obvious conclusion might be that young children can be involved in-depth by a personal relationship with a television presenter and that gratuitous, attention seeking devices are not necessary. Nor is fast pace.

The third study, by the A.B.C. Audience Research Department⁴ investigated children's responses to a wide range of children's programs, including "Play School" and "Sesame Street." Creative responses to "Play School" were greater than for other programs--and, again, a greater depth of involvement was noted.

Ego Integration

In "Play School" we speak intimately to one child. There is never a plural reference. What is the value of two caring adults giving the child all their attention for half an hour every day? They "listen" to the child's opinions, offer him/her opportunities to do things and be involved; they constantly acknowledge the fact that the child exists, that s/he matters. The value of this experience is not something that can easily be measured, but I think it is great; I think it is a real source of satisfaction to the child. Grant Noble sees this encouragement of a sense of self as a prime function of interactive television. It is far less likely to occur in a program where the line of communication is not direct.

Formation of Human Relationships

Implicit in the above idea is the possibility that having satisfying relationships with television presenters, and sharing thoughts and feelings, helps children to extend their awareness of other human beings and of their points of view. If this is true, does it encourage the ability to form relationships? Obviously, something important was happening for those autistic children who made their first responses to "Play School" presenters. And there is a mountain of daily anecdotal evidence that our presenters come to matter in the lives of many children.

Language Development

It is a tenable speculation that having human beings talk with the child as they do in "Play School" is a more important encouragement of language development than the language that comes from a puppet. With puppets, the child lacks all those important other dimensions that help create meaning, those experiential references created by facial expressions and bodily gestures. These are very much part of the communication between the "Play School" presenter and the child. We also make a point of exactly synchronizing words and actions since many developmentalists believe that meaning is founded in movement.⁵

Thinking Skills

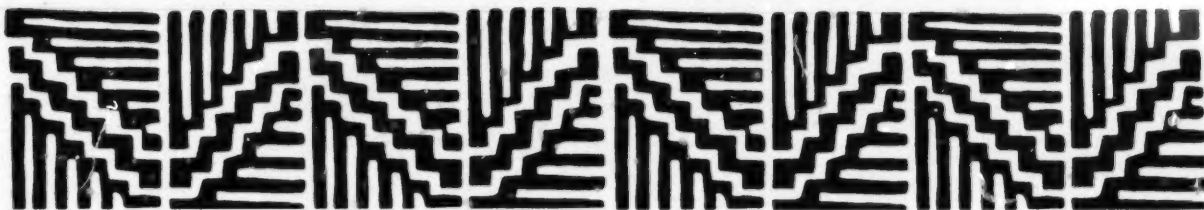
"Play School" also seeks to encourage thinking skills. We play a lot of games that involve sorting, matching, counting, ordering, and identifying shapes, but we do not force them. If we cannot incorporate them into the natural, realistic flow of events, and if we cannot gear them into a direct interactive mode involving the child, we do not believe they will be very meaningful; so, we avoid them. Didactic demonstration is not our bag.

At a somewhat deeper level, in the linking of "Play School" program segments, there is a subtle invitation to perceive relationships in the careful flow from one element to a related one. Noble⁶ relates this structuring to Vygotsky's⁷ concept of chain-complex thinking in preschool children which serves as the precursor of thinking in true concepts.

Perceptions of Reality

Do our attempts to help children understand the difference between what is pretend, and what is not, work? I believe they do, and in this context the creation of a credible and meaningful milieu is an important first base. The true space-time dimension, the avoidance of difficult techniques, the natural, spontaneous behavior of the presenters, the adaption of content and presentation pace to level, are all factors. There is no shortage of imaginative play in "Play School," but at each instance we seek to establish quite clearly when we are choosing to play, and when we are not.

(continued on page 10)



kidvid on cable

a sketch of the programming maze

by sandy mandelberger

In the trade, children's programming is called "kidvid," and ranks a close third, behind feature films and sports, as cable's most effective audience attracter. As America goes the way of cable, with established systems expanding their formats and new systems continually arriving, film and video produced for children will be in unprecedented demand.

Cable—or community television (CATV)—was inaugurated to enable areas far away from or topographically cut off from major cities to receive over-the-air signals. In these areas in the 1950's and 1960's, a cable connection to a large antenna meant individual viewing households could receive "Captain Kangaroo." In the 1970's, cable's ability to deliver twenty or more channels created a need for original productions—and made such productions potentially profitable. As subscriber numbers soar and cable moves from its traditional rural base to the lucrative urban market, productions specifically mounted for cable have evolved from a cautious experiment to a multi-million dollar industry.

Cable is emerging as an alternative to commercial, so-called "free" television. The last ten years have demonstrated that viewers are willing to pay a nominal fee (generally five to ten dollars) to receive produced-for-cable programming in their homes. Parents concerned with the advertising-determined and often mindlessly violent nature of most commercial television are turning in increasing numbers to cable television as a potentially more enlightened source of quality programming, including educational materials.

What makes cable children's programming different from typical broadcast materials? Programming and format are the main distinctions. Children's programming on broadcast television is locked into half-hour or hour-long formats. Commercial television specializes in either cartoon animation or liveaction replication of adult shows. Rarely is there a mix of styles, subjects, or formats. Most of the material is produced in-house, without contributions from independent sources. Commercial fare has been criticized for perpetuating sexual and racial stereotypes, and its advertising has resulted in a heated national debate on the merits of "pitching" products directly to children which are of questionable necessity or quality.

Cable children's programming has, so far, avoided many of these pitfalls. The major children's series rely heavily on a wide range of material from many sources. Liveaction,

original drama, animated/experimental shorts, and "educative" (not traditional educational) films of varying lengths and styles are programmed together. This mixed-bag approach to programming potentially allows child viewers to develop a strong visual sense, while expanding their approach to what visual imagery can be.

Similar to the development of radio, cable is being utilized to reach a targeted audience with specialized programs (referred to as "narrowcasting"). Series are programmed with age range and geographical location of audiences in mind. Many of the PBS children's series have been criticized for being exclusively urban-biased; as a result, many cable programmers (quite a few of whom are PBS veterans) are sensitive to the considerable rural and suburban audience that cable originally served, and work toward a healthy urban and rural mix in programming content.

Series are typically designed following one of two models: 1) short segments which are introduced by and developed around a live or animated "host"; or 2) a continuous program "loop" which can be mixed and matched with other loops or individual programs within age-specific programming blocks. Programs (or segments) are generally repeated at least once a week (which solves some of the "ruled by the TV schedule" problem that plagues commercial TV viewers). Audience mail indicates that young viewers actually welcome repeated programs.

Although many smaller cable systems generate their own children's programming, the nationally based series that are delivered to hundreds of systems via domestic satellite are clearly the most influential. The following cable networks devoted to children's programming rely heavily, for the materials they include in their programs, on the works of independent producers. "Calliope," the children's service of USA Network (a cable system specializing in live sporting events) reaches a potential audience of six million. Hosted by the voice of Gene Francis, "Calliope" programming is geared towards seven to fourteen-year-olds and covers a broad range of topics and genres. It is seen Monday through Friday for one hour in the early evening with three-hour repeats on Saturday morning. It is, interestingly, advertising-supported.

"Pinwheel" is an innovative children's series produced by Warner-Amex Cable. Targeted to a pre-school audience, "Pinwheel" is a programming loop which repeats programs for twelve hours a day. Dr. Vivian Horner, Vice President

of Program Development for Warner-Amex, describes it as "an electronic sandbox. It's always there. You can play with it when you like." This continuous programming is geared towards younger viewers who tend to vary greatly in both concentration and comprehension levels.

"Nickelodeon," the Warner-Amex satellite-delivered children's series, is centrally produced and distributed to over two million households, not only those on Warner-Amex systems. "Nickelodeon" runs for twelve hours a day and is formatted into three age-specific blocks: very young children, intermediate age viewers, and pre-adolescents.

While children's cable programming offers much hope, it has not avoided the problem of who pays the piper. The big question in many minds is: Will advertising eventually determine the content and direction of programming? Peggy Charen, President of Action for Children's Television (ACT) warns that advertising "will undermine the very reason many parents look forward to cable;" since advertising requires programs that appeal across the board, this "would cause children's [cable] TV to be a disaster in meeting children's needs." While the cable networks have expressed their intention to be "highly selective" about which advertisers will be solicited, advertising (perhaps as a primary source of revenue) seems to be an inevitable development in future cable programming.

As established systems expand to nearly twenty-four-hour schedules (Showtime; Cinemax, an add-on service to Home Box Office), and as new cable systems arrive on the horizon (CBS Cable, ABC Video Enterprises, Rainbow) daytime schedules will include more children's and family-oriented programming. As the technology grows more sophisticated, television will further explore the possibilities of viewer interaction. Two-way cable (such as the Warner-Amex QUBE system in Columbus, OH) may revolutionize the way children's programs are produced and presented.

With all these new developments, there is an apparently limitless need for original, inventive programming. Of primary interest to buyers are: original children's dramas, short/experimental works that accentuate color and movement, films dealing with sports, animals, children's entertainment (circuses, puppet shows), travel films, nature films, and educative "how to" (crafts, models) films. Film and video formats may vary from system to system, but material is generally transmitted on one-inch or two-inch quad tape, and the costs of transfer from three-quarter-inch cassette, 16mm, or 35mm prints are generally assumed by the cable system.

Although producers do sell rights directly to cable, programmers often prefer to deal with distributors when acquiring material; it is more efficient for them to communicate with a central source for a volume of product than to negotiate many different contracts with individual artists. Independent Cinema Artists and Producers (ICAP) is a non-profit distribution service which has been marketing independent film and video to cable systems since 1975. ICAP deals extensively with all the services mentioned above and with new services as they develop. Independent film and videomakers who have a film or tape they feel would work well on cable television should send a brief description title and running time to ICAP's office or call (212/533-9180) between 10:00am and 6:00pm for additional information about services and marketing strategies.

Distribution agents such as ICAP who are aware of the market and the going prices for leasing film and video can be crucial to the independent film or videomaker entering the maze of cable programming. As the trade publications announce with increasing frequency, "kidvid" is the industry's friskiest "comer."

I.C.A.P.
625 Broadway
New York NY 10012

USA Network
Calliope
208 Harristown Road
Glen Rock NY 07452

Warner-Amex Cable
Nickelodeon
1122 Avenue of the Americas
New York NY 10036

Warner-Amex Cable
Pinwheel
44 East 50th Street
New York NY 10036

the many faces of tv (continued)

Extension of Experience

"Play School" attempts to extend the child's experience by relating new experiences to old, living around them with a variety of related activities, seeking to make them as meaningful as possible. We believe it is very important to share reactions to what is new. It is this dimension of direct sharing which distinguishes interactive television from the purely observational.

A Shared Experience

One of the most important things about television is that it can be an experience shared between parents and children. In that respect, it need be no different from the bedtime story or a visit to a store or playground. To regard television, as many do, as an enemy, as something to be frightened of or opposed to, cannot produce fruitful results. It smacks of putting one's head in the sand. By not mediating the television experience, many parents probably increase its capacity to be a detrimental influence. Not that I believe that television is necessarily detrimental—that is the point of this article—but any program, be it good or bad, is better for being shared.

There is nothing surprising in Cook's research findings on "Sesame Street,"⁸ that its success is more a function of the mother's mediation of the program than of the program's direct impact on the child. I believe interactive television can go one better; that it can be a direct and fruitful experience for the developing child in all the ways I have suggested. But it would be even better if it was shared by both parent and child.

FOOTNOTES

1 Aimee Dorr, "When I Was a Child I Thought as a Child," *Television and Social Behavior: Beyond Violence and Children*, Stephen B. Withney and Ronald T. Abeles, ed. (Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., 1980).

2 G.F. Ashby, personal letter to author, 1971.

3 Grant Noble and Julie Marie Duck, "Sesame Street and Play School: A Comparison and Contrast of the Two Programs as Suitable for a Four-Year-Old Target Audience," *Media Information Australia*, 13 (1979).

4 *The Small Child Audience* (Sydney, Australia: A. B. C. Audience Research Department, 1972).

5 G.N. Getman, "Aspects of Vision, Child Development and Learning," a paper presented at Conference on the Developing Child, Sydney, Australia, 1979.

6 "Television and Oracy: A Psychological Viewpoint," paper presented at Seminar on Developing Communication Competence in Children, Armidale, Australia, 1979.

7 Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962).

8 Thomas D. Cook, Hilary Appleton, Ross F. Conner, Ann Shaffer, Gary Tomlin, and Stephen J. Weber, *Sesame Street Revisited* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1975).

Note: This article is Part Two of a two-part article by Allan Kendall. It is continued from Part One which appeared in the Fall 1980 issue (Vol. 3, Nos. 3 & 4) of *Young Viewers*.



Young Viewers

Number 3: Winter 1981

film review supplement

The following people contributed film reviews to this issue:

Merrill Lee Fuchs is Director of MCC's evaluation project and a former teacher.

Lonnie Legg was an MCC evaluation intern and graduate student in Film at Columbia University in 1980.

Gina Michaels, an artist and free-lance writer, has conducted over two-hundred film evaluations with children.

Mary Ann Renz was an MCC evaluation intern and Media Studies student at Fordham University during 1980. She performs with Orkidstra, a children's mime troupe.

Barbara Weber was an MCC evaluation intern and English student at Hunter College, CUNY, in 1980. She has performed in children's theater.

The films reviewed in this issue were evaluated by MCC interns and staff at the following sites:

Manhattan

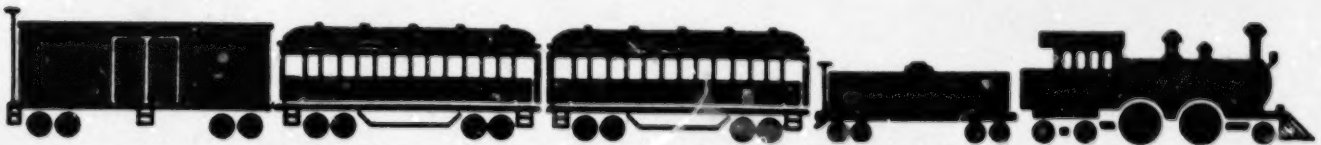
The Barnard School, The Calhoun School, Central Park East School, Hunter College Elementary School, P.S. 75, P.S. 124, Hudson Guild Child Care Center, The McBurney YMCA.

Brooklyn

Packer-Collegiate Institute.

Westchester

The Grady School, Mildred Strang Middle School.



DAYBREAK EXPRESS by D.A. Pennebaker 5 min
liveaction (Cecile Starr/USA) 1958

Slowly an orange glow spreads across the night sky behind tall buildings. **DAYBREAK EXPRESS** opens with a series of impressions: sunrise skyline in Manhattan, silhouettes of people at a train station, train noises. Now the music starts--a brass "big band" sound; it begins slowly, like the movement of the train viewers have apparently boarded, but it gets progressively faster. Whistles blow, horns wail, and the ride on the **DAYBREAK EXPRESS** is under way.

The film, with music ("Take the A Train") by Duke Ellington, celebrates the sensations of an express train ride. The city is presented from many points of view: through the windows of the speeding train; looking upward at tall buildings or the supporting beams of a bridge; out the front window of the train--as if through the eyes of the engineer. The camera even turns upside down.

Edits get quicker as the train picks up speed, until the city literally whizzes past. Music builds as the images become kaleidoscopic. Suddenly a red stop light at the end of the platform rushes toward the viewer, the music slows, then everything--camera and music--comes to a halt. We have reached Grand Central Station, the end of the line. Once again, there are only real sounds as shadowy figures pass through the gate. It's the start of another day in Manhattan.

Our audiences found **DAYBREAK EXPRESS** exciting, and participated actively during the screenings, laughing and commenting. Even those who "didn't like it" had a lot to say: one sixth grade class got involved in a lengthy, impassioned discussion on the subject of plotless films. Interestingly, the very same things that intrigued most viewers bothered a few others. These were: the pace, the lack of plot, and the music. When one sixth grader objected to the music, a classmate responded, "You just don't appreciate good jazz."

Grades three and under enjoyed DAYBREAK EXPRESS primarily as a kinesthetic experience ("it was like a roller-coaster"). One particularly successful screening took place in an intimate atmosphere--a dark, small room with the children seated close together on the floor, which probably heightened the immediacy of the experience. Most children really liked the music, but older kids were better able to understand the connections between the music and the visuals. All viewers shared one common response to this joyful film--a tremendous surge of energy.

Outstanding for poetry and language arts activities, this "impressionistic" film would also work extremely well in museum gallery tours. DAYBREAK EXPRESS makes a fine addition to programs on transportation, cinematic techniques, and music. It also works on a simple experiential level (i.e., without follow-up activities) for family audiences. Whatever the plan, it's exciting for ages six and up.

B.W.



A still from FACE DANCE.

FACE DANCE by Robert Dvorak 5 min nonverbal/animation (Serious Business Co/USA) 1979 (?)

The projector in place, the screen is pulled down, the lights dimmed. The children are quiet. Suddenly, Bach's fourth Brandenburg Concerto, playing *allegro* fills the room, and two black dots appear on-screen. "What's this?" The dots turn into eyes, then heavy black eyebrows shoot up. "This is weird; it's all jiggly." "That looks like a nose...a big nose." "Oh, it has a big hairy mustache."

There are a lot of laughs. Everyone participates in describing the face on-screen as its thickly brushed features and contours come together and rearrange at the blink of an eye. "Oh, its tongue is sticking out." "I like this one." Huge eyelashes appear. "Oh, look! Now it's a funny lady." "Now it has two teeth...buck teeth." "I like this." "Yech, I'm dizzy." "This is like a dream I had once." "It's the man with a thousand faces."

Throughout the film, the face's features and contours keep dancing. Near the end, its features gradually disappear until only the eyes remain, from which two tears fall. "The face is sad because he has to go." The eyes diminish to dots and disappear as the words *The End* flash on-screen. Even before the lights come on, kids ask, "Can we see this one again?"

As the comments above indicate, second through sixth graders were actively engaged in viewing FACE DANCE. When asked if the film was easy or hard to understand, a number of children said it was hard because "it was confusing" or "it went by too fast" or "it's weird because they aren't usual faces." However, when we talked about it further, most children demonstrated an amazing ability to recall and interpret the faces, and to recognize emotions and attitudes from a minimal amount of visual information. When we screened the film twice during a session with third graders, the group agreed it was "even better" the second time.

We screened FACE DANCE after JERRY'S RESTAURANT (distributed by Encyclopedia Britannica Educational, Corp., Chicago) with third and fourth graders on two occasions. The films worked well together and sparked lively discussions about portraits and caricatures, after which children were given crayons with which to draw a sketch of a classmate or teacher. They were encouraged to capture the distinguishing characteristics of their model. Children worked enthusiastically and frequently squealed with delight when the caricature portraits were held up and they could guess who was depicted.

When programming FACE DANCE be aware that it may be difficult to follow it with a less exciting film. FACE DANCE can work with a large group (and it makes a fine museum programmer), but it may work best with a small group--and it wouldn't hurt to screen it twice.

Fantastic for studying cartoons, caricatures, portraits, and line drawings, as well as for inspiring drawing activities. If you can, it might be fun to limit the children to using wide magic markers or thick paint-brushes so they can experiment with the same bold Matisse or Chagall-like brush strokes that are used in the film. Fine for ages seven and up.

M.A.R.

HELP I'M SHRINKING by Barbara Dourmashkin 12 min animation (Films Inc/USA) 1975

Carrie is a little girl with no confidence in herself. Given a kite, she feels unable to put it together without help; when it gets stuck in a tree, she feels incapable of retrieving it. Carrie seeks help from her family, but they are all busy; mother is busy with her plants, father is watching a baseball game on TV, and her brother Billy is playing his guitar. In the face of a series of problems, Carrie says, "I can't"--and each time she says the phrase, she becomes smaller. Finally, she becomes so small that when a vase tumbles off a table, the water sweeps her out the front door.

A friendly butterfly comes to Carrie's rescue and gives her some advice: "Try and you'll find that being small is in your mind." Once in town, however, Carrie and the butterfly are separated and Carrie barely escapes from the bustling feet that threaten to trample her.

Escaping to safety in the forest, Carrie has by now shrunk to the size of a frog. But there she has three experiences that help her to "grow" in confidence and stature. Remembering the butterfly's words, she rescues a trapped bird from an oncoming train, ignoring as she does it a smirking worm who hopes she can't do it; she revives a neighborhood ball game by retrieving the baseball from a fierce bulldog; and finally she saves two men from fighting when she finds the lost money they are arguing about.

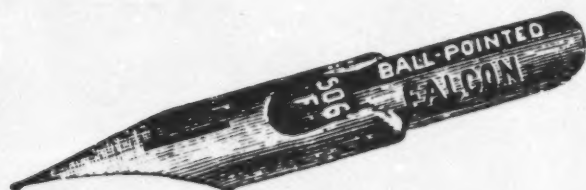
Carrie returns home much taller and feeling very different. She surprises everyone by offering to help water the plants, and then retrieves her kite from the tree all by herself. When she's happily flying her kite again, it gets stuck in another tree; but this time, instead of feeling blue and helpless, Carrie laughs confidently.

HELP I'M SHRINKING has a female narrator and is animated in bright line drawings against a white background, with a folk-style guitar music track. Fifth and sixth graders who saw HELP I'M SHRINKING were apparently too old for the movie. They found it preachy and unrealistic.

First and second graders understood the overall theme but they missed much of the humor (verbal jokes--puns, double entendres, snide comments by the worm--and visual jokes that were too sophisticated) and took Carrie's predicaments very seriously. After hearing the title, one bright second grader asked, "Is it going to make me feel sad and yucky?" This age group also had difficulty separating the fantasy elements (the symbolic shrinking) from the reality (the message). It helps to give children an introduction such as, "Have any of you ever felt small or helpless?"

HELP I'M SHRINKING worked best with third and fourth graders. They understood it ("she said 'I can't' and shrunk and did something and grew," "It's about feelings like when a child feels small") and they also appreciated the humor. The main problem for this age group, as well as all the others, was that the film generated very little energy or enthusiasm, even among those who liked it. Consequently, it also generated very little discussion. HELP I'M SHRINKING can be used for classroom discussions but clearly it would benefit from being programmed with another film along the same thematic lines--GERALD McBOING BOING, for example. It is most suitable for ages eight and nine.

B.W.



INK, PAINT, SCRATCH by Robert Swarthe 11 min animation/liveaction (Little Red Filmhouse/USA) 1979

How do you make a film without a camera? As Robert Swarthe explains in INK, PAINT, SCRATCH, one way is to scratch the emulsion from 16mm film and color in the scratches. It will look like a lot of squiggly colored lines until it is run through a projector--which is when the magic begins.

"The lines are moving and fun," exclaimed one second grader on seeing the first part of INK, PAINT, SCRATCH. In the next sequences the director shows how one can take processed 35mm film and ink in simple figures (lots of balls, lines, and triangles) frame by frame. Swarthe draws the figures, usually with bright primary-colored ink, then fills in the background either by dipping the film in a colored solution or by spattering it (scrapping a toothbrush over fine wire mesh). He ends the filmmaking "lesson" and INK, PAINT, SCRATCH by showing CHAMELEON--a short which uses a variety of cameraless techniques with images synced to lively music.

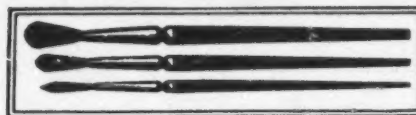
INK, PAINT, SCRATCH received exceptionally positive ratings from viewers in the second, third, and fourth grades and generated a tremendous amount of enthusiasm for cameraless filmmaking. As one fourth grader put it, "It's not really a how to [film]--it adds to your wonderment about how films are made." A classmate added, "It's good to get your imagination going."

Children loved CHAMELEON and were surprised that it could be so exciting ("he hardly drew anything and he made them look so lively and great"). When asked what CHAMELEON was about, children said, "a little guy bouncing," "a tap-dancing ball with little feet," "a little yellow inchworm flying all over the place on a green worm," "I don't know--but it was funny."

Older kids enjoyed the film but many expressed doubts that "little kids" would understand the film because "he doesn't tell you how to do the music [synchronize] and the music makes it." One sixth grader summed up his class' reaction by saying, "It builds up too many hopes--[younger] kids will be frustrated."

Despite a certain glibness of tone, INK, PAINT, SCRATCH is a fine springboard for filmmaking activities and would work with most groups over the age of seven.

M.A.R.



JENNY by Ginny Hashii 15 min color/liveaction (Carousel/USA) 1978

JENNY is an eight-year-old Japanese-American who lives in New York City with her parents, grandmother and little sister. In this three-generation portrait, director Hashii uses a number of cinematic techniques to reveal the family's thoughts and feelings about blending and preserving their heritage within American culture.

The film begins with a series of family album slides (over the clicking sound of a slide projector) while Jenny talks about her friends and family and describes herself as "no different from anybody else." The film then switches to liveaction, showing intimate scenes of Jenny with her family. Viewers see Jenny and her little sister having a pillow-fight and doing origami under their grandmother's tutelage, the mother giving an Oriental doll show for Jenny and her friends, and a family dinner for which Jenny and her grandmother prepare rice. Jenny also plays with her father. Intercut with these sequences are lengthy on-camera interviews with Jenny's mother, father, and grandmother in which they discuss the World War II years and how it felt to be in the infamous California detention camps. The adults discuss their struggle to readjust after the war and how their experience affected their views on raising children. The film ends with daughter, mother, and grandmother, side by side, performing a traditional Japanese dance in colorful kimonos.

Children's responses to JENNY were mixed. Any scene with Jenny got their full attention, but there was a marked difference in their involvement during the interviews with the parents. Some became fidgety, others yawned or talked to their neighbors. A few kept glancing back at the projector to see how much film was left. When asked if the film was easy or hard to understand, children specifically mentioned the interviews, which they found difficult because "they were talking about their entire lives" and "it was too talky talky." Apparently kids wanted to see more of Jenny herself. As one fifth grader said, "It gave the parents' ideas; you really should get it from Jenny." Despite their objections, however, when asked to rate the film, our audiences gave JENNY consistently good marks. The kids seemed to be voting for Jenny herself rather than for the film.

When issues involved in a film are not within the experience of the child (issues such as aging, urban relocation, or historical events), or the ideas are not developmentally accessible to the child (abstractions, sex-roles, prejudice), it makes sense to try to present the film from a subjective point of view. The reason NOW WE LIVE ON CLIFTON (reviewed in Young Viewers Film Review Supplement Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 1979) failed with kids was that it was treated as a documentary instead of being dramatized from the point of view of a character with which children who have not had that experience could identify.

A good example of the subjective/concrete (as opposed to the objective/abstract) approach is I'LL FIND A WAY (reviewed in Young Viewers Film Review Supplement Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 1979) a film that provided focus and excited young viewers. This portrait of Nadia De Franco, who has a crippling handicap called spina bifida, is presented (chronologically) from Nadia's point of view: her thoughts, her narration, and her life. This clear focus was missing in JENNY.

Although JENNY would probably work best with older groups (high school and college) because of its range of information, the film's focus on a young girl also makes it accessible to younger children. JENNY works well with seven to ten-year-olds and would compliment programs dealing with Japanese-American culture, family history, and sharing and preserving ethnic roots.

M.A.R.



METAMORPHOSIS by Catherine Mercier & Timothy Wallace
10 min nonverbal/liveaction (Texture Films/USA) 1977

This gentle, nonverbal nature-study shows a young girl who captures a caterpillar and builds a device, complete with an elaborate alarm mechanism, to ensure that she (and viewers) can observe the emergence of a butterfly from its cocoon.

METAMORPHOSIS begins with the girl, who is about twelve years old, alone in a field near some woods. She examines various plants and insects and eventually finds a caterpillar. Back in her plant-filled bedroom, the girl puts the caterpillar in a special jar along with some leaves. While the caterpillar spins its cocoon, the girl follows a large diagram entitled, "Alarm System for Metamorphosis." She connects wires, a bell, and a battery to the jar, and tests the alarm by touching the exposed ends of two wires together so that the bell rings. Then the girl positions the two wires so that they almost touch the cocoon. With a pen and clip board, she charts the metamorphosis' day-to-day progress, and tends her plants and the environment she has created. Finally, the bell rings and the viewer, along with the girl, sees rumpled multi-colored wings emerge from the cocoon's casing. Shortly, the wings unfold, revealing a Monarch butterfly. The girl gets the butterfly to perch on her hand by dipping her finger into sugar solution and takes it back to the field. The girl raises her hand and the butterfly flies away.

METAMORPHOSIS is beautifully photographed and director Mercier is extremely sensitive in her handling of the girl. The film is also noteworthy because it is non-sexist; the girl is clearly the protagonist and she independently sets up and executes her experiment.

Our audiences were very attentive during METAMORPHOSIS, and many viewers participated actively during the screenings, commenting and asking questions. A fifth-grade science class was particularly inquisitive ("What are the plants for?" "Won't the battery give the caterpillar a heart attack?" "Why is the heart beating [on the soundtrack]?") and waved goodbye as the butterfly flew away at the end. This class also wanted to know where the diagram for the alarm system came from and said, "She should have used books to learn stuff." One Chinese-American third grader, which had been consistently unresponsive during other screenings, sat in rapt attention throughout METAMORPHOSIS and unanimously rated the film "super." The class was scheduled to go to the library after the screening, and when their teacher asked if there was anything they wanted to research, hands shot up all over the room with answers like "caterpillars," "cocoon," "spiders," and "butterflies." In another screening a third grader said, "The girl was so interested in nature that it made me feel good."

When we asked children to discuss the film, they became somewhat critical although they had been very involved during the screenings. Some were bothered by the girl's solitude ("What about her parents?") and that she never talked to anyone; those who saw it without an introduction seemed disappointed that "there was no story." These objections may be offset if you tell your audience beforehand that the film is not a story in the typical sense—that it is about an experiment and has no words.

Some seven and eight-year-olds (particularly those from a lower income predominantly Hispanic neighborhood), had trouble understanding the technical sequences—building the alarm, the incubation of the chrysalis, etc. One child suggested adding a narration, for the alarm sequence, at least.

As the contrast in children's responses during and after the film indicates, we did not find that METAMORPHOSIS withstood a discussion of the film as film. It is better suited as a direct lead-in to activities and discussions involving science and nature study, which channel the interest and curiosity aroused by the film. Fine for ages seven to ten, particularly when used as part of a science curriculum.

L.L.



SHORELINES by Al Jarnow 3 min liveaction/animation
(Picture Start/USA) 1977

Both playful and precise, SHORELINES (pun intended) is a sensual and esthetically pleasing "animated dance" of real shells, stones, and other beach treasures. Filmmaker Jarnow choreographs the objects to natural sounds—the "music" of surf, gulls, bells, and fog horn—with quick cuts and stop-motion photography. He arranges his collection of objects according to similarities of shape and contrasting scale in carefully calculated, quickly changing patterns.

With a roar of surf, stones and seaweed are shown on a wet sandy shore. Smooth beach stones replace each other, so that a small stone "grows" to fill the outline of a larger stone and then dwindles to its original size. Clam shells, scallop shells and crab torsos perform similar transformations. Xeroxed single-frame pictures of waves square off beside two shells which pulsate rhythmically to the sound of gulls and surf. Periwinkle shells appear, arranged in size order on a table. They wax and wane in rows, like waves, as a buoy bell rings and a fog horn blows. Water laps gently on the beach as waves once again dominate the soundtrack. The camera sways, ever so slightly, and the filmmaker's toes enter the bottom of the frame, introducing a whimsical human note. The result is a temporal and mutating mosaic, the visual equivalent of music.

Children of all ages enjoyed this film. They were attentive during the screenings—many laughed when the shells "danced and changed places on the table"; some gleefully identified "toes" in the film's final frames—but they were by no means quiet. Both during and after the screening, children discussed aspects of the film: technique ("Is it really changing colors?" "No, he's putting different ones [in the same place]."); visuals: ("The shell on a stick looked like a bell..." "It was a sundial,") and the filmmaker's intention in making the film ("He didn't tell about the shells [no narration].") "But it would be boring if they described every shell.")

In evaluating *SHORELINES*, four questions proved most effective in simultaneously helping children figure the film out and in giving us insights into what they perceived:

- (1) What pictures and sounds do you remember from the film?
- (2) Does the film remind you of anything?
- (3) What do you think about the way the film was made?
- (4) Why do you think the filmmaker made the film?

(However, questions two and four are unnecessary if the film is introduced as indicated below.)

When asked what pictures and sounds they remembered from the film, many children were apparently so intrigued by the movement and patterns that they didn't recall the sounds; a few, however, said they particularly liked the sounds. One eight-year-old commented that the film made him feel good because, "I love the ocean and the sounds were like the ocean." In describing what they remembered about *SHORELINES*, children used richly descriptive language: "when the shell was running around and around"; "when the shells were growing...in a cross like"; "when the shells were changing like waves going across." The film's kinesthetic qualities make it particularly suited to language arts and poetry activities, and its images evoked many associations from the children, (often expressed as similies). Several young viewers were reminded of their own beach experiences.

We asked children what they thought about the way *SHORELINES* was made. A number of children said it was "cleverly made"; others said it was "weird" and "unusual." (As we've found in evaluating other non-narrative films, such adjectives are not necessarily negative; rather they are an indication that the film is "different.") Two children explained what they meant by unusual: "I've never seen a film like that"; and "you don't usually see shells dancing!"

We explored a variety of introductions in our testing, but one, in particular, worked best to modify children's narrative expectations. Since collecting objects is an activity children as well as adults enjoy, we asked if children had their own beach (or naturalist) collections and discussed how they might arrange them to share with other people. Then, just before starting the film, we told the group that *SHORELINES* had neither story nor words; it was the filmmaker's way of displaying his beach treasures for us to see.

Although children of all ages were engaged and intrigued by the film during the screening, their evaluation of it afterward (particularly regarding their understanding of the meaning/intent of the film) seemed to vary according to the context, the introduction, and children's individual abilities to suspend narrative expectations. Some children expressed confusion about the meaning of the film when we asked them why they thought the filmmaker made the film; they said it "didn't say anything" and "just showed a lot of shells." However, when the film was properly introduced, most children gave in to its playful kinesthetics and seemed to accept the film as an esthetic experience.

SHORELINES' increasing complexity of pace and cuts posed no problem for most young viewers; in fact, it helped to energize their discussions. Some youngsters felt that it should have been "slower, so you could get a better look"—a situation which can be helped by allowing children a second viewing and by warning them before they see it that it is a very fast film.

Since the film is well structured and the objects are concrete and familiar, and since serialization and arranging objects in size order are clearly within the capabilities of school-age children, the film's organizing principles are accessible to over-sixes. We did not test the film with pre-school children but it might work very well with this age group since preschoolers enjoy sorting and arranging objects.

SHORELINES is an excellent art film; the cinematic equivalent of a still life, it is even "framed" by the opening/closing beach shots. It is also "about" many things—including collecting, arranging, and displaying treasures or artifacts, which makes it great for museums.

A fabulous introduction to box art, and mixed media collage, it would be a wonderful addition to music or dance programs, and could be used quite successfully with young filmmakers. While it may work best in class-sized groups (followed by a discussion or an activity), *SHORELINES* would also work in a family program mixed with more conventional narrative films. It is delightful and well worth showing to anyone over three.

M. L. F.



THE TAP DANCE KID by Barbara Grant 30 min
liveaction (Learning Corp of America/USA) 1979

Open with a montage of Broadway marquees. Cut to the inside of a dark, empty theater where a Black man on stage and two White men in the otherwise empty audience seats are discussing their problem: where to find a boy to do the lead tap dance role. No one they've auditioned is good enough, and, with three weeks left until opening night, they're getting desperate. The Black man, Dipsey (clearly a veteran hooper), says he knows a boy who could handle the job but, "it won't work out." Cut to Willie Sheridan, a Black eight-year-old, joyfully tap dancing on a New York sidewalk.

The film moves to Willie's home, a well-appointed upper-middle-class New York brownstone apartment, where, lying on his bed, he is tapping his feet on the wall to the annoyance of his older sister Emma (twelve and fat) who is trying to study her law books. Emma wants to become a famous lawyer, but her father refuses to encourage her ambition; her mother (a very attractive and carefully groomed woman) is distressed that her daughter is fat and unpopular. Emma isn't too pleased about her appearance either, but she takes comfort in telling her mother, "I may not get thinner, but I'm sure gonna get smarter." She explains that "some people would rather be Golda Meir than...Twiggy."

Dipsey, who is Mr. Sheridan's brother, arrives to give Willie his tap dance lesson. Mr. Sheridan, a successful lawyer, has no use for tap dancing, and, despite Willie's enthusiasm, he firmly limits the lesson to one hour. Meanwhile, Emma convenes a meeting of the Children's Rights Crusade, which consists of Emma and three passive child members. After reading the minutes, the group decides they need a test case in order to indict adults' oppression of kids. Willie makes the perfect plaintiff.

Willie's father becomes upset when the tap lesson exceeds the one hour limit. Not only does he have a less than friendly relationship with Dipsey, but he explains that tap dancing belongs to a time when "there was no other way for Blacks to make it" and puts a stop to the lessons. Mr. Sheridan doesn't want his son "bowing and shuffling" on stage.

A troubled Willie goes to the park with his friend, who calls him "weird" because he likes to dance. Hurt, Willie calls Dipsey, and when they meet later in the park Willie pleads for help. Dipsey refuses, saying there is nothing he can do. Willie calls Dipsey "chicken" and they part on bad terms.

Willie arrives home and his father scolds him, saying "You just have to trust that I know better than you what's right and what's wrong." Willie yells back that he's going to dance no matter what. Mr. Sheridan grabs him and gives Willie a swat as Emma intones, "that's child abuse." In despair, Willie throws his tap shoes out the bedroom window. Emma later pleads Willie's case before her father, introducing the tap shoes (which she has somehow managed to salvage) as evidence, but Mr. Sheridan remains unmoved.

Emma decides it's "too late for fear" and that night she takes Willie to Dipsey's nightclub where the older man apologizes for letting the boy down. The following morning, when her worried parents demand to know where the missing boy is, Emma agrees to show them if they "promise to be sensible." Mother, father and sister arrive in the wings of the theater just as Willie begins his audition. As he performs, the producers look on with a mixture of delight and relief (they've found their boy) while one parent exclaims, "I didn't know he was so good." "There's a lot of things about us you don't know," Emma replies smugly. Mr. Sheridan walks out on the stage and proudly acknowledges, "This is my son."

As the title indicates, *THE TAP DANCE KID* is ostensibly about Willie, but in fact Emma is the main protagonist. Willie's actions consist of begging (his father or Dipsey) and being a sore loser when he doesn't get what he wants (throwing his shoes out the window, calling Dipsey "chicken"). Emma has the best lines; it is she who takes action and moves the story from one place to another. Emma hopes her father will accept her ambitions if he accepts Willie's, and at least partially she uses Willie as a pawn for her own ends. Our biggest problem with the film is that the character of Emma perpetuates the stereotype that "smart" girls are unpleasant, unattractive, and unpopular. The film's structure is choppy, making the evolution of events fuzzy, and for all his apparent severity, the father turns out to be a paper tiger, which makes the children's final victory ring hollow.

THE TAP DANCE KID generated a good deal of discussion. Our audiences generally enjoyed the story and they liked seeing a character they knew from television (Emma is played by Danielle Spencer of "What's Happening?"). Some kids had already seen the uncut version of the film on television, and others had read the book (*Nobody's Family is Going to Change* by Louise Fitzhugh). However, several kids expressed reservations about the film's tone; some seemed confused about its message. Many groups were disturbed by what they regarded as name-calling (when Willie's friend calls him "weird" and when Willie calls Dipsey "chicken"). The fight between Willie and his father seemed to make some younger viewers nervous; one child suggested it be cut because "it gives a false idea that fighting solves problems." Many of our viewers expressed support and sympathy for Willie and felt that his parents should have permitted him his ambition. In all our screenings, however, not one child said anything positive about Emma's character; as one child put it, "If she was my sister, I'd kill her."

When asked why they thought the film was made, many children seemed to think the filmmaker was aiming for adults ("to show adults that kids can do things," "to tell grown-ups about kids"). Others thought the message was "to prove that you can do anything you want if you just do it," or to tell kids not to "quit something you like just 'cause others don't like it." Young viewers didn't necessarily take the film's various "messages" at face value, however; as one ten-year-old put it, "I could never talk to my parents like that--they'd kill me." Some eleven-year-olds found the happy ending too predictable "you see it all the time" and suggested "they could have just let him go and audition."

Much of the humor in *THE TAP DANCE KID* was over the heads of our viewers, even those in the sixth grade. The reference to Twiggy and Golda Meir, for instance, involved two women who were best known before most of our viewers were born. Many lines were sarcastic and much of the humor was ironic--both of which are difficult for most children to fully understand. Emma's legal jargon posed serious problems for our audiences as did the fact that so much of the film depends on the soundtrack; the characters stake out their positions verbally and, as in *JENNY*, the monologues (particularly those of the adults) did not keep the groups' attention.

THE TAP DANCE KID can be used as a lead-in to values-clarifications discussions of family conflicts, and children's rights issues. It can be used for programs about Black families, and although it works with eight to ten-year-olds, it is clearly better as a family film.

G.M.

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Errata: On page 16 of Volume 3, Number 2 (Summer 1980), *DANCE SQUARED* is by René Jodoin. On page 14 of Volume 3, Numbers 3 & 4 (Fall, 1980), *Children in Front of the Small Screen* is also published by Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA (Footnote 8).